The Personality and Problem of Hieronymus Bosch

by R E Hemphill MD DPM
(*Barrow Hospital, near Bristol*)

The major works of Bosch are still among the strangest and most startling of human creations. In his day, when it was believed that the devil could be a physical as well as a spiritual reality, his revelations of demoniac activity and man's predicament must have been as terrifying as a nightmare come true.

Attention has been focused mainly on the interpretation of their content. But the more significant problem is why the paintings continue to arouse such interest after more than 400 years in spite of changes in culture, knowledge, and religious beliefs.

Although the paintings are without topographical or historical incident, their disturbing appeal has been maintained, for they appear to express the constant uncertainty of man's purpose and the insecurity of his tenure in a world he occupies, unwelcome and an intruder. Bosch makes visible unconscious fears deeply rooted in man's spiritual inheritance. His fantasies are credible because of the artist's accurate observation, and by using common dream mechanisms he portrayed convincingly a world inhabited by creatures who embody persistent collective fears. They convey strongly the impression that Bosch actually witnessed the terrible scenes he painted, and believed implicitly in their message.

The clue to the enigma lies in the personality of the artist. If we can discover what he believed and what he saw in his paintings, and the processes by which he came to conceive them, we shall be able to deduce something of his real nature. Since he left no writings and had no pupils, and there is no account of him from anyone who met him, his paintings must be the main source of information. Bosch had clearly a very special sort of vision which reached great intensity in his middle years. Amongst the important formative influences must be reckoned the universal belief in witchcraft which became such a vital matter to everyone during the last twenty years of the fifteenth century, that is, the period when Bosch produced his major works. Art historians appear to have laid little emphasis on this obviously very significant factor.

The hypothesis here put forward is that Bosch represented the devil's campaign on earth according to the belief in witchcraft current at the time; and that his vision was influenced by this belief as that of a psychotic by his delusions. The intensity of Bosch's fantasies corresponds well with the fears and frenzies of the great witch hunt period.

Records show that Bosch, born Jerome van Aaken, grandson of a painter, Jan van Aaken, worked in Bois le Duc, or 's Hertogenbosch, from 1480 to his death in 1516. He signed his paintings Jheronimus Bosch from the Dutch name of the town. He was married, for his widow's inheritance was settled in 1531, but there is no mention of children. His name is recorded from 1480 to 1516 in the archives of the Brotherhood of the Holy Virgin, where he took part in musical performances, and for whom he designed a Crucifix and windows for the chapel. A portrait drawing dated 1480 in the Arras Codex shows him about 30, so it can be assumed he was born before 1450.

Works by Bosch collected by Cardinal Grimani of Venice were studied by Giorgione in the early sixteenth century, and Philip II acquired six from Felipe de Guevara, who in 1560 mentions Bosch in his commentary on painters. Thus, to have received commissions and been collected outside his country, he must have had recognition in his lifetime. Many copies and engravings after him, and paintings in his idiom appeared in the next 100 years. Of the forty paintings with some early copies and drawings which survive, none is dated and few are titled. They can be divided into three groups, secular genre, religious and biblical, and the great fantasies. There are no portraits.

His early works seem to have illustrated subjects with a moral, as in the painted table-top in the Prado (Baldass 1960, Plate 1), obviously in the manner of some of his predecessors, but in the great fantasies that are ascribed to his middle years from about 1480 to 1510 there are more points of difference than of similarity with other painters and the mediæval moralists. It is thought that the turbulence and distortion of the fantasies gave way to a more peaceful view of the world in his later days.

The great fantasies show a world under the domination of devils who seem to vanquish and torment mankind. In these strange landscapes many synthetic and distorted objects with unnatural fruit, flowers and creatures, glass tubes, globes, bivalves and other things occur. Scholars have recognized many of these as symbols of mediæval mysticism and alchemy, and have argued that Bosch expressed himself in symbols and allegories whose meaning was comprehensible in his day, but has now been lost. This explanation fails to take into account other

aspects of his work, particularly the metamorphoses of the living creatures. Although the fantasies are full of action and incident and in part depict incidents such as the Creation, or the Expulsion from the Garden, no continuous story can be traced in them either horizontally or vertically. They show the following elements: naturalistic landscape, dream configurations, symbols of alchemy and mysticism, magical transformations of demons and men, and mankind assaulted by magic. The theme is that mankind everywhere is at the mercy of devils, and is every time defeated.

The landscapes proper are of great beauty and realism, but into them are introduced constructions, bridges and groups of objects in different planes which have no logical spatial or temporal connexions. The effect is of a dream that has been secured with all its action, emotion and strangeness. It so conforms with dream experiences that the onlooker ignores the inconsistencies and does not question the realism. The same symbol objects, the jug on the bough, bagpipes, bivalves, the owl, the magpie, the toad, the woodpecker, appear in many paintings.

Influences in Bosch's Development

Bois le Duc, a commercial city, had no strong connexions with the great Flemish studios in which by the fifteenth century the Italian Renaissance was strongly felt. Because of the rebuilding of its great cathedral it retained late a Gothic tradition. Bosch employed a neo-Gothic style of painting in which mediæval and new elements were combined. He seems to have kept apart from some contemporary developments in art, although he cannot have been unaware of them or without the opportunity for contact with art centres. Perhaps the spirit of the Renaissance and Italian humanism, which placed man at the centre of life, was unacceptable to his mediæval mind and inward-looking personality.

He may have been acquainted with mysticism through the 'Brethren of Life in Common', who opened two Houses at Bois le Duc in the fifteenth century. This association, founded by a disciple of the mystic Ruysbrook, had as its objects devotion to prayer and contemplation, and emptying the mind of all images of the world of senses. The world was revealed by symbolism and analogy. From the alchemistic symbols in his paintings, Bosch probably had a knowledge of alchemy. Alchemy was introduced into Europe in the thirteenth century and, with the introduction of printing, writings on the subject were widely distributed. It implies symbols and allegories and a body of esoteric philosophy, as well as chemical research.

Witchcraft

The most important influence in the spiritual and social life and behaviour of Bosch's day was the belief in witchcraft that prevailed in Northern and Western Europe. The country was populated by hostile demons, creatures of swamp and forest, dark winters and uncertain summers. Birds, beasts and trees concealed the real identity of the supernatural. The little men, magic birds, sinister beasts, the ogre in the oak, the enchanted forest, the magic mountain, were realities that still persist in fairy tales. They were very different from the comfortable anthropomorphic mythology, with gods as heroes, of the agreeable Mediterranean climate, and the classical concepts.

In 1484 Pope Innocent VIII published a Bull in which he named witchcraft as the most important heresy, and enjoined its eradication. The 'Malleus Malleficarum' of Sprenger & Kramer (1486) gave detailed instructions how it might be detected. It was clearly shown that the devil, seemingly omnipotent, and his agents, often in the guise of Christian citizens, were everywhere warring against Christian men. They caused the great disasters, plague, fires and floods. Devils might assume the forms of humans, trees, animals and other objects, animate and inanimate. They could possess their victims or change them into other creatures, natural and unnatural. They could damage sexual function and procreation, and cause impotence or unnatural progeny.

A pact with the Devil was sealed by kissing the posterior, and the naked buttocks were therefore of special significance in witchcraft. There is little doubt that it is in this connexion they are emphasized everywhere in Bosch's fantasies.

Great persistent fears were: possession by the Devil, metamorphosis by witchcraft, which included being absorbed into the environment with loss of identity, or penetrated by hostile bodies or materials through the natural openings, and being rendered impotent, infertile or breeding devils. Rich and poor believed implicitly in witchcraft, and on their sworn evidence that they had witnessed such phenomena more than 100,000 persons were burned in the next 200 years. In Scotland, in 1727, a woman was burned for using her daughter as a flying horse.

It is apparent that Bosch strongly believed in visible witchcraft. His paintings show an obsession with the fears of metamorphosis, absorption, penetration and teratogeny. His drawings –

'Witches', 'Witch and a Man in a Beehive', 'The Devil's Ship', 'Alchemistic Man' or 'The Human Tree' (Fig 4), 'The Listening Wood and the Seeing Field' (Baldass 1960, Plates 136, 137, 148, 152, 149) – and monsters hatching from fruit and eggs illustrate this pre-occupation.

Against this background, some of the great fantasies can be examined.

'*The Temptation of St Anthony*' (*Lisbon*)
This triptych (Baldass, 1960, Plates 86, 87, 88) purports to show episodes from the life of the saint. In the background of each panel are landscapes: the left a sea coast, the centre a burning village, the right a fabulous city. In the middle and foreground impossible constructions, bridges and towers are assembled with the effect of dream creations. Vistas, hollows and tunnels open and lead nowhere as in surrealist painting. Devils on and under the ground and in the water are busy with their strange and violent activities, and aerial demons float over the burning village with the assurance of aeroplanes. From the city moat a black monster arises to devour a man.

The creatures seem to include both demons and wretched men altered by magic. Many are homunculi, condensations or syntheses of man, trees and other objects. Trees in particular evolve into creatures, and the same tree forms appear in other works; the beckoning fingers and antlers of dead branches, the split bole that discloses a baby, or from which a figure emerges, the gaping hole of a dead trunk, the ripe fruit that produces not seeds but monsters. In the left panel, a giant man, part tree, part hut, with the entrance between his thighs, is rooted to the ground.

The familiar symbols of magic abound, but of special horror is a magic table of transformed humans. Absorption and penetration are strongly represented. Man and creatures are taken into the ground, the beast, the fish and implements enter through the anus.

The work may have been commissioned for a monastery of St Anthony: hospitals of this order specialized in the treatment of venereal and skin diseases. The burning village, one of the first representations of fire in painting, may have been suggested to Bosch as 'St Anthony's Fire' (erysipelas).

'*The Garden of Delights*' (*Prado*) (Baldass 1960, Plates 62 – 74)
Scholars have disagreed about the interpretation, and it is not known whether it was commissioned by a religious or a secular patron. The details are too involved to have been deciphered even by the initiated, and the proliferation of ideas seems to have been the result of unconscious mental processes.

The three panels show the Creation of Eve, the Garden of Delights, and Hell, and on the reverse the Creation of the World. Part of the first panel tells the story of the temptation, with expulsion from the Garden of Eden, but thereafter the Biblical story is lost, and in the centre and right panels there are many more points and episodes of difference than of similarity.

The psychopathic features of the St Anthony are evident. A shrub branch enters the anus of a kneeling youth, a diving figure protects himself with his hands against genital assault, an armoured monster on the right panel with the legs of a man is punctured by an arrow, and tubes enter the ani of naked men. The multi-headed beasts and symbiotic creatures of the Creation panel seem to imply teratogeny in a creative effort doomed to failure. The gross fruits and flowers, the bowls, bivalves, and the rat that enters a glass tube to approach a human face contained in a bowl remind us of dreams and delirium.

On the terrifying right panel the Devil on his throne surveys the musician's hell. A man is spreadeagled on a harp while tormented musicians stop their ears against the cacophony of a hurdygurdy and trumpets. Above is the inscrutable Alchemistic Man, larger than the others as Gulliver in Lilliput. There is neither ecstasy nor passion and, as in all Bosch, no overt sexual behaviour, normal or perverted. The lips do not meet; the figures are immature; rancour, tears and laughter are absent; there is no note of criticism or of hope.

The other fantasies show similar incidents and creatures, but 'The Last Judgment' (Vienna) (Baldass 1960, Plates 47, 48, 49) is even more violent and disturbing.

Religious Subjects
Bosch seems to have painted few scenes from the Testaments. He was more attracted by the lives of the hermit saints. Versions exist of St Anthony, St Jerome, St Christopher, St John in Patmos, and others. In these the demons are natural fauna of the landscape. In contrast to their behaviour in the fantasies they are at peace, as indifferent to the saint as he is to them.

There are demons in all the religious pictures, and in 'The Marriage at Cana' (Baldass 1960, Plate 109) and 'The Adoration of the Magi'

(Prado) (Baldass 1960, Plates 102–108), there are distortions of the Christian iconography. A woman with bagpipes, the Devil's emblem of erotic sin, on the roof of the stable at Bethlehem, is hard to reconcile with the Christ story. In the sufferings of Christ, our Lord shows no anguish. The few attendant women do not look upset, and St Veronica (Baldass 1960, Plate 122) turns her face away with a modest expression. Soldiers, priests and crowds seem more stupid than hostile.

The faces of St Anthony in the great triptych, Christ mocked (Baldass 1960, Plates 110, 112), Christ carrying the Cross (Plate 118), the official who crowns Him with thorns (Plate 112), seem to have been painted from the same model. They resemble somewhat the Arras portrait of Bosch, and have the oblique look of mirror self-portraits.

Secular Subjects

The constructive signs of man's industry and determination to survive seem to have no place in Bosch's world, as he has never portrayed farming, marketing, town and country pursuits, and only rarely domestic animals or children.

Professional experts are treated with contempt. Churchmen, friars and nuns are ineffective and unsympathetic. The Conjuror (Physician) (Baldass 1960, Plate 10), the Dentist in 'The Haywain' (Plate 24) are obvious charlatans. A surgeon pretends to remove a stone of folly (Plate 11) from the head of a credulous patient as a cure for backwardness or madness. Bosch was the first artist to depict this subject, which was often repeated by Dutch painters in the next two centuries. The swindle seems to have been practised at fairs, as shown by Jan Steen. Amongst the professionals, only the alchemist or mystic is painted with respect. He is shown serene, aloof from the demoniacal activity, superior to man and witch.

Interpretation of the Fantasies

Current explanations of the fantasies follow four main lines: (1) That they relate to rituals of a mystical society; of this there is little confirmation. (2) Psychoanalytic, the value of which is limited to clarifying certain psychological mechanisms. (3) That they were the productions of a psychotic. (4) That Bosch was a didactic moralist who consciously used allegories and symbols on a vast scale to convey his message; this is not entirely satisfactory as it fails to explain more than it clarifies.

Bosch was not a moralist in the accepted sense, for he draws no conclusions about the human predicament in the face of temptation, and offers neither ethical advice nor religious comfort. Also the fantasies lack literary continuity and are too obscure and involved in design to be understood as moral tales. The emphasis is not on morals but on the triumphant exuberance of the supernatural. There is a reiteration of the symbols of alchemy and magic, and Bosch displays dream mechanisms and forms peculiar to the requirements of his personal vision.

He shows man as inadequate, his supernatural enemies dynamic and dominant. Only the mystic or alchemist is indifferent to them. Nowhere are the forces of Evil routed by the Cross. The futility of man's struggle is emphasized even in minor details, as in 'The Adoration of the Magi', where a wolf devours a man who has failed to kill him with a dagger, and his mate is about to catch the wife.

It seems more reasonable to regard Bosch as a visionary artist whose purpose was to portray, not to preach. Although he might employ symbolism and allegory, important in mediæval communication, the mainly illiterate public could not have had the specialized knowledge to make the interpretations that scholars think Bosch intended. It can be concluded that he was steeped in alchemy and thus introduced its special and mystifying objects. His paintings certainly show a world inhabited by devils conceived and portrayed with the emotional power, the strangeness and convincing realism of dreaming. The paintings in fact are documentaries of the Devil's campaign, and his viewers must have been convinced that they showed events he had actually seen, with a present or prophetic vision.

No more impressive evidence in support of the proceedings against witchcraft can be imagined. It can, therefore, be surmised that they were commissioned and collected by the principals, secular and clerical, of the Counter-reformation, and the prosecutors of witchcraft.

Bosch may not even have been a confirmed Christian. His religious pictures are weak in feeling, and some contain magical allusions likely to confuse the observer. Above all he neglected the theme of Virgin and Child, essential to the doctrine of redemption.

The immunity of the alchemist and mystic hermits from demoniac aggression, the insistence on objects of alchemy, and the deliberately giant size of the alchemist suggest strongly that Bosch saw alchemy and mysticism as the salvation and solution, and not Christianity. Further, the alchemist, mystic and magician resemble the

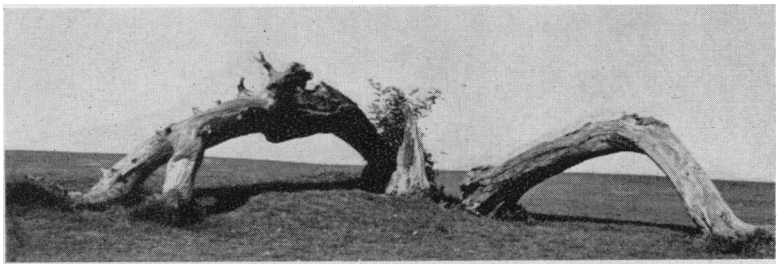

Fig 1 *Tree form indicating absorption into the ground with penetration*

portrait of Bosch himself. There are thus grounds for saying that Bosch's great works are the products of his deeply held magical beliefs and his unusual and possibly psychotic visionary powers.

The Nature of Bosch's Vision

Although mediæval in spirit, Bosch painted nature with a realism that anticipates Breughel, one of the greatest Northern masters of landscape. Yet unlike him his landscapes contain few of the signs of man's social life and purposeful activities which Bosch must have seen constantly around him. His mind had rejected or been unable to register matters that contradicted his preconceptions. Instead, his landscapes are crammed with inventions of his personal iconography, and into them are built the dream constructions. It seems that Bosch's visions are projected into the world of reality so that the great fantasies were conceived as a whole and appear to us unified and consistent as an actual scene.

We can surmise that with his exceptional visualizing powers, objects as well as ideas which would have evoked powerful associations in the unconscious, produced visual images or hallucinations that he perceived and accepted as real, and thereby altered the total original perception. This is common in psychiatric illness, and some patients are unable to resist it, but they seldom

Fig 2 *The Man-House from Bosch's 'Temptation of Saint Anthony' (National Museum, Lisbon). (Reproduced from Baldass 1960, by permission of Thames and Hudson)*

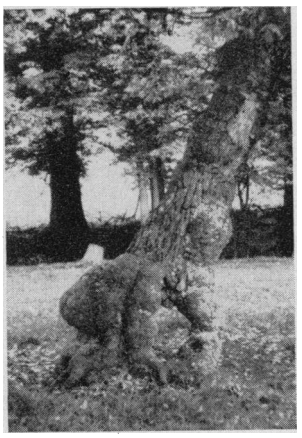

Fig 3 *Tree form of Man-House*

Fig 4 '*The Human Tree*' (*Albertina, Vienna*).
(*Reproduced from Baldass 1960, by permission of Thames and Hudson*)

have the ability to concentrate and organize their personal visions and hallucinations into a significant work of art.

Blake, aware of this phenomenon, said that 'natural' objects, i.e. free from associated evocations, weakened visualization. Artists may find it impossible to retain the image of the model and disregard the associated shape it recalls, so that a portrait may come to resemble an earlier portrait or another person.

There are important differences between the visionary artist and the artist of imagination. The former paints his evoked images, but an artist of conscious imagination illustrates an idea according to how he imagines it ought to appear. In the 'Apocalypse' by Dürer the masterly illustrations do not suggest that he actually saw the vision of St John. The illustrators of fairy stories and romantic painters of the supernatural like Fuseli and Martin are tedious and theatrical. Even the demons of Grünewald and Bosch's successors seem no more convincing than the devil masks of an African witch doctor. Indeed, all these inventions are recognizably men dressed up for the purpose. Bosch's are devils in their own right, a supernatural species evolved from things he saw in the forest and field, transformed as he looked at them by his unshakeable, perhaps psychotic, belief in witchcraft. To such a believer it is the magic within the tree that causes it to change; it is not the imagination of the observer that has made it appear to do so. There is a very fine but definite line between hallucinations and imaginations.

Trees, dead and alive, are the source of the most important and recurrent of Bosch's forms. They can be seen changing appearance and dis-

closing the magic or evil creature that they have concealed. We can see these tree forms for ourselves in the old oaks and elms in a park. There are dead branches like antlers rising from living green, the hollow trunk, the fallen tree. Oaks particularly show the eyes and the ears of seeing and hearing trees, the spiky branches penetrate, the twigs around the scar where a branch has been lopped off are the whiskers of the snarling creature frequently depicted. The impressions and convolutions of the old trunks indicate the writhing forms being absorbed within. The fallen tree seems to be a living creature being taken into the ground and penetrated (Fig 1). Even the Man-House in the St Anthony (Fig 2) can be matched by an oak tree form (Fig 3).

'The Human Tree' (Fig 4) shows many of the transformations. Two hollow trunks standing in boats on the river give the appearance of a horse drinking at a trough. The body is an egg in which tiny men play, a branch pierces it. Growing from it the head of a giant alchemist is surmounted by a table on which rests the alchemist pitcher, out of which appears a ladder with a devil upon it. The magic owl on the tree is in scale larger than the faun and the crane. The setting is an elegant landscape with a township devoid of life except for birds. The tree form appears in the Hell panel of the 'Garden of Delights'.

Looking at these it is not difficult to experience the horror of realizing that a man bewitched has been changed into an oak.

There are points of resemblance between Bosch's work and surrealism, and probably some of Bosch's images were evoked by the association of words and sounds as well as ideas and visual perceptions. However, as we do not know his language and cannot get the word or sound associations that may have occurred to him, it is impossible to interpret the surrealist implications.

Whether a psychotic or not, Bosch must have induced dream states in himself when visualizing the dream structures and dream fragments of his fantasies characteristic of his great period. Some visionaries, like Walter Mitty, may on occasions be unable to resist transforming themselves and the objects around them into appearances suggested by unconscious desires and fears. This occurs in schizophrenia in which the instability of the boundaries of the ego with imperfect differentiation of reality and tendency to dissociation predispose to the effect. In this psychosis, magical delusions based on archaic fears may occur. The patient, like the painter Munch, may feel that he is fusing with or being absorbed into the surroundings, or fear that through the openings of mouth or anus hostile elements may penetrate (Fig 5). Through an operation wound a devil may enter and assume the patient's shape under the skin (Hemphill & Stengel 1940). This phenomenon is irresistible and not contrived, and it may be transient or enduring according to the nature of the mental disturbance.

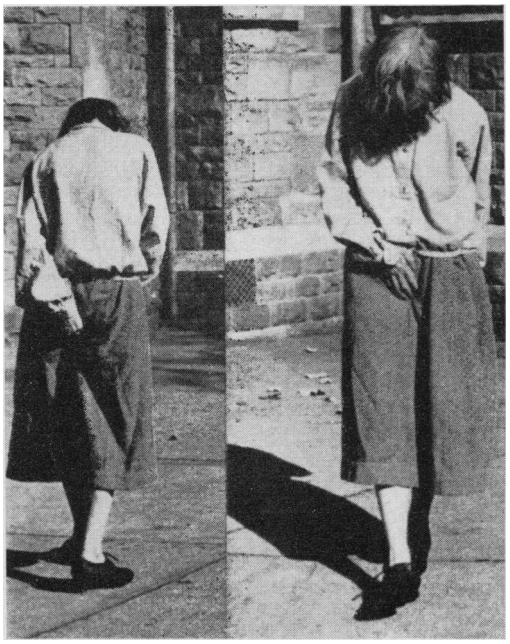

Fig 5 *Schizophrenic protection against penetration*

To summarize, his vision, his beliefs or delusions determined that what he perceived was seen in accordance with his precepts. His visionary processes resembled that of psychotic illness in which contradictory realities are rejected and perceptions brought into line with preconceived beliefs. This occurs in schizophrenia and in dream states, but it cannot be held that Bosch was necessarily a psychotic. The delusional belief in witchcraft was common to normal persons in his day, and sustained psychotic illness impairs integrated creative work.

The Personality of Bosch

Some inference can now be made about the personality and nature of Bosch. He was withdrawn and inward-looking, unaware of the warmth of love, unmoved by human pleasures and disappointments, unconcerned with children. He was introspective, engrossed with mystical philosophy and magic, he was almost certainly an alchemist, he believed implicitly in witchcraft, and he was a doubtful Christian. He was a schizoid personality. Deliberately or compulsively

he painted documentaries of the supernatural world and the Devil's campaign.

He was a member of a musical society and we can surmise that he was a lute player, for harp and lute are painted with sympathy, and in the Hell of the 'Garden of Delights' the only real human suffering is expressed by the musicians who stop their ears against the noise.

He had exceptional visualizing powers, and the content of his pictures and the evolution of his creations were determined by his belief in witchcraft. He perceived the world in this light, and the transformations of trees and other objects were unconscious and not contrived. We can assume that he painted the world as it appeared to him. It is improbable that he consciously selected all his symbols or that there is a deliberate plan behind his conceptions. He was, therefore, an artist and not a doctrinaire.

Like Blake, his fantasy production was intense, but abated later. This may have been due to a transient schizophrenic process. His great fantasies were conceived at a time when men everywhere were obsessed with the dangers of witchcraft. Bosch, of all artists, gives us a terrifying view of the fears and beliefs responsible for the cruelty of religious intolerance and witch hunting which retarded the progress of science and humanity.

The cannon, which signalled the death of mediæval armour by science, is as much an emblem of the fifteenth century as the aeroplane is of the twentieth. Bosch's visionary powers and his philosophy are epitomized in his gun (Baldass 1960, Plate 66). The wheels are ears that it has deafened, and its barrel is the blade, notched and damaged, that it has superseded. Prophetically it is pointed at the ultimate conflagration, impotent as a tank in the holocaust of Hiroshima. Compared with it the great cannon of the cyclothymic Dürer is as hope to despair.

Bosch, with the intuitive foresight of visionary artists, may have sensed the inevitable destruction of life by the misuse of science, as he stood on the threshold of the scientific age.

The primitive obsessional fears of metamorphosis, transformation and absorption, of penetration and of distortion of sexual and procreative powers that Bosch revealed persist today in the fairy tales of Northern mythology, the terrors of children, and archaic delusions of psychosis.

Authority for the statements about the life and works of the artist will be found in the bibliography.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baldass L von (1960) Hieronymus Bosch. London
Clark K (1949) Landscape into Art. London
Combe J (1946) Hieronymus Bosch. London
Fraenger W (1952) The Millennium of Hieronymus Bosch. Trans. E Wilkins & E Kaiser. London
Hemphill R E & Stengel L (1940) *J. ment. Sci.* **86**, 364, 790
Lassaigne J & Delevoy R L
(1958) Flemish Painting from Bosch to Rubens. London
Martin-Mery G
(1957) Bosch, Goya et la Fantastique. Bordeaux (catalogue)
Matejeck A (1960) Art and Architecture in Europe. Prague
Tolnay C de (1937) Hieronymus Bosch. Basle